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Soviet Said to Hold Million in Prison, Including 10,000 on Political Charges

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 10 — While Soviet authorities have drastically reduced the size of their prison population in the 20 years since Stalin's death, Western experts believe that more than a million Soviet citizens, including about 10,000 political prisoners, remain in captivity in a network of about 900 prisons and labor camps throughout the country.

Interest in the Soviet penal system has been raised by the publication of Aleksander I. Solzhenitsyn's latest book, "The Gulag Archipelego: 1918-1956," which discussed the system before the prison population was cut to about one million, a figure most Western experts believe has remained constant since the mid-fifties.

Mr. Solzhenitsyn estimated that the total population of Soviet prison camps did not at any one time exceed 12 million, of whom half were probably so-called political prisoners. This peak is believed to have been reached just before Stalin's death 1953. Mr. Solzhenitsyn did not offer any over-all total of prison camp inmates for the period of roughly 40 years covered by his statistics.

Estimate by the C.I.A.

The Central Intelligence Agency, through the use of satellite photographs, puts the current prison population at 2.4 million to 2.5 million, but State Department and outside experts such as Peter Reddaway, the British specialist on Soviet prisons, believe the number is closer to one million. Of these, according to the estimate of Mr. Reddaway, a senior lecturer at the London School of Economics, about 10,000 can be classed a political prisoners.

On a per-capita basis, this would mean that two and a half times as many Soviet citizens are in captivity as Americans. The United States has the largest prison population in the Western world, about 425,000.

Since the late nineteen-twenties, the Soviet Union has not released information about its crime rate or its prison system and little is known about the mass of ordinary prisoners. But much has been learned about the system in recent years through interviews with former inmates allowed to emigrate to Israel, the United States and other countries.

In addition, Mr. Reddaway and others have done extensive research on the system by carefully analyzing the many written accounts of the camps circulated in underground, typed form known as "samizdat," or "self-published."

The political-prisoner group includes intellectuals who have been arrested for circulating dissident documents regarded as anti-Soviet by authorities, those who seek to practice their religion outside the officially approved system of worship, and those who have engaged in activities in support of Soviet minorities.

Most Go to Labor Camps

Life in any penal system is grim, of course, but the Soviet system in unique in that almost all prisoners are assigned to labor camps. Only a small percentage spend their terms in prisons, such as the prison in Vladimir, a town northeast of Moscow that is known to tourists for its ancient churches.

Comments about the camps have varied, but in general most recent prisoners tend to agree that the quality of life depends primarily on the type of camp to which a person is assigned.

There are by Soviet law four basic types of camps.

The vast majority of prisoners are assigned to what are called "ordinary regime" camps.

Data on All Types

The next grade of severity is known as "hardened regime," and the two most severe grades are called "strict regime," and "special regime." The last two are usually reserved for dangerous criminals or political prisoners.

Many political prisoners, however, particularly first offenders, or those convicted of lesser violations, have served in the "ordinary" camps and as a result, political prisoners have been able to provide information about all types of camps.

These points seem to emerge:

¶Life is difficult in almost every type of camp, but most people survive and are released when their terms expire, something that rarely happened in the Stalin days.

¶As in Soviet society, if a prisoner does not engage in political activity critical of the regime, he is unlikely to suffer any additional penalty. But if he is outspoken in defense of his rights, or engages in the kind of free-thinking that led to his arrest—if he is a political prisoner—he is apt to endure harsh punishment, ranging from isolation in a narrow, dark dungeon, to physical abuse, and he loses such "privileges" as mail and visits.

¶Camps are not totally bleak places. Some former prisoners called the experience "meaningful" because of the opportunity it gave them for introspection. And in some respects, they said, life in prison was interesting because discussions could be held with a cross-section of society not readily available on the outside.

¶Many prisoners are not easily cowed in Soviet camps. Despite threats of punishment, many of them know their rights and when authorities deny them, these captives have engaged in hunger strikes that often have resulted in decisions in their favor. In fact, in the last two years, Moscow has instructed camps to tighten discipline, and in the "strict" regime camps, the bread ration, the mainstay of the diet, has been reduced to less than a pound a day.

Secret Channels Used

Prisoners have also been able to send out regular reports and protests through secret channels about camp conditions.

In 1969, for instance, seven political prisoners issued a clandestine statement that said, in part:

"Russia is still crisscrossed by a network of camps where —despite all the international conventions signed by the Soviet Government—forced labor and cruel exploitation are the norm, where people are systematically kept hungry and constantly humiliated, where their human dignity is debased.

"Through these camps passes an uninterrupted human flow, millions strong, which gives back to society physically and morally crippled people. This is the result of a deliberate penal policy, worked out by experts and presented by them in special handbooks with a cynicism worthy of the concentration-camp experts of the Third Reich."

A report by Mr. Reddaway for the International Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in the U.S.S.R. in Brussels last year, said that "the worst single aspect of the conditions in Soviet camps, especially those of strict and special regime, is the constant hunger, which torments and even tortures the prisoners, often for years on end."

He quoted from the appeal of Yuri Galanskov, a young man arrested in 1967 for having edited an underground journal called Phoenix. He died in 1972 on an operating table in a camp hospital. In that year, Mr. Galanskov had sent the following smuggled appeal to the International Committee of the Red Cross and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights:

"I am ill with a stomach ulcer. Of the food I receive I can eat only a small part, and so every day I undereat. At the same time, in the conditions of a strict-regime camp I am effectively deprived of any real possibility of obtaining from my friends and relatives the food products I need. At night I have terrible pains, and so every day I get too little sleep. I have been undereating and getting too little sleep for five years now. And yet I work eight hours a day. Every day is a torment for me, a daily struggle against pain and illness."

Death Was an Exception

Mr. Galanskov's death at the age of 33 was, however, an exception, Mr. Reddaway believes.

Mr. Reddaway, in an interview in New York where he is spending the academic year at Columbia University, said that although several other political prisoners had died in camps, he believed that Soviet authorities did not as a policy seek the death of prisoners. Rather, "keeping people feeling hungry is part of the punishment," he said.

Anatoly Marchenko, who wrote a book smuggled to the West called "My Testimony" about his experience in camps in the nineteen-sixties, said, "The usual rations are such as to make a person feel perpetual want of food, perpetual malnutrition."

Woman Describes Diet

"The daily camp ration — under the strict regime — contains 2,400 calories (enough for a 7- to 11-year-old child) and has to suffice for an adult doing physical labor, day after day for many years, sometimes as many as 15 to 25," he wrote. "The convicts never even set eyes on fresh vegetables, but-